Alexa, I'm Glad I Met Ya...

A Web Browser Add-On That Makes Surfing Sweeter

By Kevin Savetz

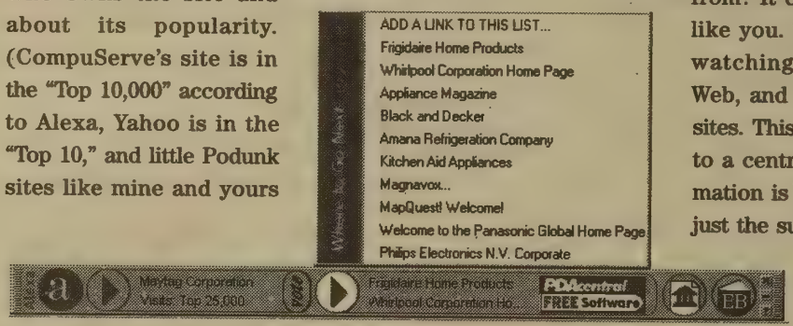
When you visit a site, Alexa goes to work, displaying relevant information in its toolbar. The toolbar provides two primary kinds of information—about the site, and about other sites on the same topic.

I'm not a big fan of software add-ons. Most browser add-ons, plug-ins and other doodads manage to underwhelm me with their utility while nibbling away at the stability of my computer system. In my book, a lot of those gadgets just aren't worth the trouble.

I've made an exception, though, for a program called Alexa—an add-on that makes surfing the Web faster, easier, and more informative.

After you download and install Alexa, you'll find a toolbar alongside your Web browser's window. When you visit a site, Alexa goes to work, displaying relevant information in its toolbar. The toolbar provides two primary kinds of information—about the site, and about other sites on the same topic.

When you visit a Web site, Alexa will tell you who owns the site and about its popularity. (CompuServe's site is in the "Top 10,000" according to Alexa, Yahoo is in the "Top 10," and little Podunk sites like mine and yours are humanely labelled "Moderate traffic.") Clicking on the arrow icon next to these stats reveals more information, including the number of links to the site from elsewhere, the number of pages that comprise the site, its speed and how often it is updated.



Just to the left on the toolbar is the feature that makes Alexa truly useful: The related links index. Here, a pop-up menu reveals a list of other sites on topics similar to the current one. For example, while visiting the clip art warehouse ArtToday (*www.arttoday.com*), the program recommended a desktop publishing site, a font archive and other clip art sites. Alexa creates this list with a combination of recommendations (the "add a link to this list" command allows you to suggest a site) and by watching the surfing patterns of its users. As a result, Alexa's list of related links usually contains a few questionable choices. (When I'm at the Maytag Appliances Web site, the recommendations of other appliance manufacturers' sites make perfect sense. But I am at a loss to explain why MapQuest, a mapping tool, is recommended as well.)

Despite these occasional eccentricities, once you've found one site that's what you want—or almost what you're looking for—the related links index makes it easy to find others. It provides the convenience of Excite's "more like this" function, without making you trundle off to a search engine to do it.

Where does that usage pattern data come from? It comes from Alexa users like you. The program works by watching where you go on the Web, and in what order you visit sites. This information is reported to a central database. That information is completely anonymous, just the surfing pattern of another nameless Web surfer. So you don't have to be embarrassed if you're a regular, closeted, visitor to the Spice Girls Web page.

Alexa can bring pages back from the dead, sort of. A major feature is its ability to access an archive when a page that you want to access is unavailable. When you happen across that all-too-common "404: file not found" message, you can tap the toolbar's Archive button to try to retrieve a stored copy of that page from Alexa's 8-terabyte archive (some 500,000 Web sites). It's a great feature, but don't bother pressing that Archive button unless you really want that information. You may have to wait several minutes while the server loads the page from tape. (You can keep surfing in the meantime—Alexa will inform you when the missing page is available from the archive.)

Back in Alexa's toolbar, you'll also find quick access to an online dictionary and encyclopedia. Oh, and you'll notice a postage-stamp-sized advertisement there as well. (Hey, it's a free program. Learn to live with it.)

Alexa won't force you through the trouble of upgrading every time a better version comes along. Its "auto update" capability means that enhancements will be installed without taking your time or attention. Remind me again why all programs don't have this capability?

For PCs, Alexa requires a 486 or Pentium family processor running Windows 95 or NT. It also requires Netscape Navigator or Microsoft Internet Explorer 3.0 or later—other browsers, such as Opera, won't work with it. On the Mac side, Alexa is still being alpha tested—and is prone to occasional crashes, as alpha versions are wont to be. It requires a PowerPC running MacOS 7.5 or later. You can get more information about Alexa or download the program from *www.alexa.com* . ◆

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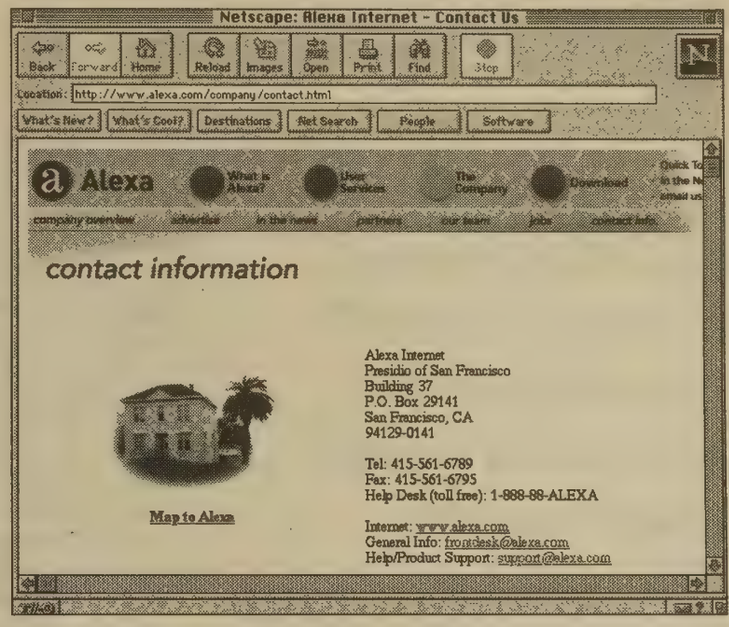

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